

Childbirth in the United States
Gender and Women's Studies 537
M/W 2:30-3:45, Ingraham 120
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Spring 2019



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Course Description

Childbirth is a **powerful event**, physiologically, psychically, and—for many—spiritually. It marks the entry of a new human being and new relationships into the world. At the same time, **structural forms of power** deeply shape how, when, and for whom birth happens: birth is a key site of both oppression and resistance.

This course examines birth and power in both of these senses through a **reproductive justice framework**, a framework for analysis and action developed by Black women and women of color health organizers and scholars. We will analyze **contexts, experiences, practices, ideologies, and historiographies of childbirth** in the United States from roughly the 17th century to the present, with the heaviest emphasis on the 20th and 21st century.

We will examine the ways that **colonization, genocide, enslavement, racism, capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and ableism** have shaped all of these aspects of childbirth. We will also inquire how key **movements and groups resisting** some of these forms of oppression have had the power to reshape birth, as well as locating in birth a source of transformational power.

The course is divided into five units: 1) Reproductive Justice, 2) Alternative Birth: A Critical Engagement, 3) Writing Birth Histories: Historiography, 4) Writing Birth Histories: Testimonies, and 5) The Politics of Birth Work.

Course Learning Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Attain a deep understanding of the framework of *reproductive justice*, and use it to analyze contemporary discourses, practices, and conditions of childbirth
- Understand how racial, sexual, gender, economic, and colonial domination and resistance have shaped both reproductive realities and the ways that childbirth histories have been written and circulated
- Identify and discuss shifting ideologies and practices of childbirth in the US over time, and relate these to power
- Carry out an independent oral history project on childbirth

Course Information

This is a 3-credit course. The class meets for two 75-minute periods each week over the spring semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc) for about 3 hours out of classroom for every class period.

- Counts toward 50% graduate coursework requirement
- Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S

Grading:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Due Date</i>	<i>% final grade</i>
Participation	ongoing	20%
Assignment 1: Reflection Paper	February 8	15%
Assignment 2: Critical Engagement Paper	March 1	20%
Oral History Project		
Preparation	March 15	5%
Transcript	April 5	5%
Analysis	April 26	25%
Take-Home Final	May 8	10%
TOTAL		100%

Final grades will be assessed in the following manner:

A=93-100 B=83-87 C=70-77
AB=88-92 BC=78-82 D=65-69 F=under 65

Participation Grade

A grade will be assigned for each class meeting according to the following criteria:

0 Absent

1

- Present, not disruptive.
- Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.

2

- Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic case or reading facts, though little analysis or interpretation
- Offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the material), without elaboration or very infrequently (perhaps once a class).
- Actively listens
- Demonstrates sporadic involvement.

3

- Demonstrates good preparation: knows reading facts well, has thought through implications of them.
- Offers interpretations and analysis of material (more than just facts) to class.
- Actively listens
- Contributes well to large and small group discussion: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way,
- Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.

4

- Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed readings exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material
- Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of course material, develops new approaches/questions that take the class further.
- Contributes in a very significant way to large and small group discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments,
- Actively listens
- Does not dominate
- Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.

Honors option

Additional assignment: Narratives of Reproductive Justice in Wisconsin
~7 page analysis paper, based on oral history interview with a reproductive justice organizer/practitioner in Wisconsin. Interview subject cannot be a course visitor. You must meet at least once with the Oral History Program staff to plan your interview.

Classroom expectations and discussion guidelines

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before coming to class and to take responsibility as active participants in class discussions.

You should come to class prepared to engage in thoughtful and constructive conversation that is respectful of others in the classroom and takes seriously the issues and themes presented in the readings.

That said, discussion participation and silence often manifest structural power differentials. The historical and contemporary forms of oppression, violence, and resistance that have shaped the history of childbirth also shape this campus. The classroom cannot be a “safe space,” but my hope is that it can be a space of learning and growth.

In order to foster such a space, the following guidelines and discussion starters were developed by experienced social justice educators Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. These guidelines are “*intended to recognize and respond to unequal power relations in the room, help more reticent students speak up, help more dominant students slow down, and guide open and humble entry into the conversation*” (2014, p. 8).

Discussion Guidelines

- **Strive for intellectual humility.** Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.
- Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.
- **Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader group-level patterns**—especially if you are part of a dominant group in relation to the phenomenon in question
- **Notice your own defensive reactions** and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
- **Recognize how your own social positionality** (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) **informs your perspectives and reactions** to your instructor, other course members, and those whose work you study.
- **Differentiate between safety and comfort.** Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth.
- **Keep focused on yourself**, *What does this mean for me and my life?*
- **Identify where your learning edge is and push it.** For example, whenever you think, *I already know this*, ask yourself, *How can I take this deeper? Or, How am I applying in practice what I already know?*

Discussion Starters

- I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable to say [X], but . . .
- From my experience/perspective as [identity], . . .
- I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let me know if I do, but . . .
- It feels risky to say [X], but . . .
- I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did . . .
- It seems like some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
- Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?

- This is what I understand you to be saying:. . . Is that accurate?
- I've been wondering about how we are using [term] in this discussion . . .
- Is [X] a good example of what the author was saying?
- How would you respond to [X] from a reproductive justice framework?
- I am having a “yeah, but...” (sceptical/defensive) moment. Can you help me work through it?
- What is another example of [X]?
- This perspective is new to me, but I'm wondering if it is accurate to say that . . . ?

Adapted from Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education. Democracy and Education 22:1 (2014), p. 8.*

Assignment submission and late work

Assignments are due by 9 pm on the due date as an upload to Canvas. Email attachments will not be accepted except as a time stamp (e.g. if Canvas is not functioning, send the assignment to me and then upload it later that day).

Late work will be accepted with a grade deduction of 5% every 24 hours. Unavoidable delays due to an emergency will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Being present in class and life issues

Attendance is required—and life also happens. If you are going to miss a class, please provide a one-(full) page, single-spaced written précis and response to the readings, emailed to me as an attachment, within 48 hours of the missed class start time.

If any problems arise, either academic or personal, that might jeopardize your participation in the course, please try to inform me of the problem and set up an appointment with me as soon as possible.

Disability Access

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations in GWS 537, students must first be registered with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/>). Students who have or think they may have a disability are invited to contact the McBurney Center for a confidential discussion at 608-263-2741 (phone), 608-225-7956 (text), or by email at mcburney@studentlife.wisc.edu.

If you have already registered with the McBurney Center, and if you wish to request any accommodations on the basis of disability, you should schedule an office appointment with me within the first two weeks of the semester. Please schedule this office appointment by email. To maintain the confidentiality of your request, please do not approach me before or after class to discuss your accommodation needs. You should bring a copy

of your service plan to our meeting.

Please note that I am unlikely to honor an accommodation request made within 72 hours of an assignment due date. Advanced planning on your part enables both of us to create an accessible classroom environment. Please do not delay in contacting me regarding your accommodation requests.

Academic Honesty

Students are required to familiarize themselves with the UW policies on plagiarism and to assume responsibility for honesty in all course work.

Required Reading

BOOKS

(Available at Room of One's Own; order [here](#), and on reserve at Woodman Astronomy Library)

Ina May Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*

Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America 1750-1950*

Julia Chinyere Oparah and Alicia Bonaparte, eds, *Birth Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*

Miriam Zoila Perez, *Radical Doula Guide*

Margaret Charles Smith and Linda Janet Holmes, *Listen to Me Good: The Life Story of an Alabama Midwife.*

CANVAS

Frequent additional readings will be posted on Canvas. These are marked in the syllabus.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1 Introduction

W January 23

Introductory discussion, syllabus review

UNIT 1: Reproductive Justice, Birth Justice

Week 2

M January 28

- Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017), 1-57 (CANVAS)
- Linda Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a

- Life-or-Death Crisis." *NYT Magazine*, 208. (CANVAS)
- Cazembe Murphy Jackson, Reproductive Justice as Trans Resilience (CANVAS)

W January 30

- *Reproductive Justice*, 58-116 (CANVAS)
- Black Mamas Matter Alliance and the Center for Reproductive Rights, *Black Mamas Matter: Advancing the Human Right to Safe and Respectful Maternal Health Care*, selections (CANVAS)

Week 3

M February 4

Women's Earth Alliance and Native Sexual Health Network, Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies: Building an Indigenous Response to Environmental Violence, through p. 60 (CANVAS)

W February 6

Birth Justice selections:

- Julia Chinyere Oparah, Introduction: Beyond Coercion and Malign Neglect: Black Women and the Struggle for Birth Justice, 1-18.
- Syrus Marcus Ware, Confessions of a Black Pregnant Dad, 63-71
- Christ-Ann Magloire and Julia Chinyere Oparah, Unexpected Allies: Obstetrician Activism, VBACs, and the Birth Justice Movement, 156-165
- Priscilla Ocen and Julia Chinyere Oparah, Beyond Shackling: Prisons, Pregnancy, and the Struggle for Birth Justice, 187-197.

Friday, February 8 **ASSIGNMENT 1: REFLECTION PAPER DUE

UNIT 2: Alternative Birth: Critical Engagement

Week 4

M February 11

- Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide*, xi-74, 98-99

W February 13

- Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide*, 133-182
- *Williams Obstetrics*, 24th ed., Ch 22, Introduction through "Management of Normal Labor" (online through library)

Week 5

M February 18

- *Ina May's Guide* 183-247
- Trevor MacDonald, "Transphobia in the Midwifery Community" (CANVAS)
- Woman-Centered Midwifery Statement (CANVAS)

- Birth for Every Body Response Letter (CANVAS)
- MANA Core Competencies (CANVAS)

W February 20

- *Ina May's Guide*, 248-273
- *Williams Obstetrics*, 24th ed., Ch 27, (online), Introduction through "Occiput Anterior Position," and "Fourth Stage of Labor"

Week 6

M February 25

- *Ina May's Guide*, 274-330
- In-class video and discussion: *The Farm*

W February 27

Oral history presentation: Troy Reeves, UW Oral History Program

- Oral history readings (CANVAS)

Friday, March 1 **ASSIGNMENT 2: CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT PAPER DUE

UNIT 3: Writing Birth Histories I: Historiography

Week 7

M March 4

- Leavitt, *Brought to Bed*, Introduction and Ch. 1, 1-35
- Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004), selections

W March 6

*NO CLASS MEETING, ALTERNATE ASSIGNMENT TBD

- *Brought to Bed*, Ch. 2
- Rachel Dudley, Toward an Understanding of the 'Medical Plantation' as a Cultural Location of Disability, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32 (4): 2012.

Week 8

M March 11

- *Brought to Bed*, Ch. 3
- Laura Briggs, The Race of Hysteria: "Overcivilization" and the "Savage" Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology. *American Quarterly* 52:2 (2000): 246-267.

W March 13

- *Brought to Bed*, Ch. 4
- Sharla Fett, *Consciousness and Calling: African American Midwives at Work in the Antebellum South*. In *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, edited by Edward Baptist and Stephanie Camp (2006).

****Friday, March 15 ASSIGNMENT 3a: ORAL HISTORY PREP DUE**

Week 9

M March 25

- *Brought to Bed*, Ch 5
- Susan Smith, *Japanese American Midwives* (2005), selection

W March 27

- *Brought to Bed*, Chs. 7-8
- Dana-Ain Davis, *Obstetric Racism: The Racial Politics of Pregnancy, Labor, and Birthing*. *Medical Anthropology*, 2018. (CANVAS)

UNIT 4: Writing Birth Histories II: Testimonies

Week 10

M April 1

- *Birthing Justice* selection: Alicia D. Bonaparte, "Regulating Childbirth: Physicians and Granny Midwives in South Carolina"
- Smith and Holmes, *Listen to Me Good*, p. xvii-62

W April 3

- *Listen to Me Good*, pp 63-112

****FRIDAY, April 5 ASSIGNMENT 3b: ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT DUE**

Week 11

M April 8

- *Listen to Me Good*, pp 113-158
- In-class film and discussion: *All My Babies*

W April 10

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

- Peer oral history transcripts

Week 12

M April 15

- Katsi Cook (Akwesasne Mohawk), interview selection (CANVAS)
- Changing Woman Initiative, Digital Stories (CANVAS)

W April 17

- Anne Finger, *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth*

(selection) (CANVAS)

UNIT 5: The politics of birth work

Week 13

M April 22

- *Birthing Justice*, selections TBD

W April 24

- Mary-Annette Pember (Re, "The Midwives' Resistance: How Native Women Are Reclaiming Birth on Their Terms" *rewire.com*, 2018 (CANVAS))
- In-class video and discussion, *Catching Babies*

****FRIDAY, April 26 ASSIGNMENT 3c: ORAL HISTORY ANALYSIS DUE**

Week 14

M April 29

- Perez, *Radical Doula Guide*
- Dana-Ain Davis, "Radical Black Birth Workers," from *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, Premature Birth* (2019)
- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Stacey Milbern, Crip Lineages, Crip Futures, in Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018)

W May 1

Final discussion and send-off

****Take-home final due to Canvas WEDNESDAY, MAY 8 by 9 pm**

NOTE: This syllabus is a "living document," and may be amended over the course of the semester. I will notify the class of changes with as much advance notice as possible.